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Asking Civil Questions

DALLAS
There was an hour between planes. A man behind two brochure-laden card tables was calling out in a midway voice, "Step up and learn about our space program."

So I approached. I had always wondered about the intense young people who man the Lyndon LaRouche stands, but I'd always been in too much of a hurry to stop and talk to them.

The sign said things like "Better beams in space than Soviet missiles here," and "Send Gramm and Rudman to Siberia," and "Support nuclear energy."

"Why do you back him?" I asked in a conversational tone. He glowered and replied, "Do you support our space program?"

"I mean, why are you for LaRouche?"

"Do you or don't you want a strong defense?"

"Oh, I see, you ask questions but you don't answer them."

He was thin, with short, tightly curled hair, and his ferret face was getting redder and more tense by the moment. His voice, wary from the start, became hostile. "Do you want to buy some literature?"

I said I was more interested in hearing him explain his point of view. Clearly he was annoyed, but he accepted what he took as an unavoidable challenge.

"He's against liberal traitors, and I'm against liberal traitors."

"And what do you mean by that?"

The pale young woman behind the adjoining card table came to her comrade's rescue. He was a hawker, not a

talker. "Do you know the word patriot?" she asked accusingly. An elderly man with a cozy smile wandered up, and they turned to him in relief, pointedly ignoring me.

Maybe it was my voice, maybe my clothes, I don't know how they decided so quickly to consider just another airport transient as the enemy. But they did. I wasn't looking for a fight, I was just curious. The whole conversation lasted less than two minutes and would obviously get nowhere.

As it happened, I was on my way to Austin for a conference at the University of Texas entitled "The Future of U.S.-U.S.S.R. Relations: Lessons from 40 Years Without World War." The idea, we were told, was that for all the troubles, something must have gone right and if we could figure out how 40 years without world war were achieved, we might be able to keep peace for at least another 40 years.

There were current and former officials from the National Security Council, the State Department, the Pentagon, the C.I.A., academics and scientists of note and a few important Russians at the conference. There were arguments, of course, and keen awareness of the fact that hostility between the U.S. and the Soviet Union is the biggest danger for the world.

But compared with the LaRouche people's reaction to a casual questioner responding to their invitation to step up and be informed, the atmosphere was positively amiable. Among Americans and Russians, there was no trouble agreeing that security and survival were the prime and common needs for everybody.

At his summit with Mikhail Gorbachev, President Reagan indulged in the fantasy that if the earth faced an invasion by Martians, U.S.-Soviet quarrels would be quickly set aside in the common defense of our planet.

When the reference was made in Austin, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, a former National Security Council member, said whimsically that he objected on behalf of Martians, who shouldn't be presumed to be hostile. It was a good point, and a reminder of the question about the LaRouche people. Whom are they so instinctively against, and why?

At the time of the industrial summit in Bonn last year, elections were approaching for the important West German state of Rhineland-Westphalia. Mr. Reagan, and all the rest of us on the trail, came to a town where lamppost after lamppost was emblazoned with posters carrying snide, thinly disguised neo-Nazi messages. On investigation, it turned out they were organized by Mr. LaRouche. His candidates got nowhere in the German elections, but they tintured the atmosphere.

His people made a pitch in France. There is no sign that they had any involvement with the extreme right-wing party of Jean-Marie Le Pen, but they stood on the main streets of Paris shouting the same call to arms that they pitch at Dallas, Dulles, Kennedy, etc. They have disappeared from Paris, presumably because of French resistance to such a foreign brand of rabid xenophobia.

This is a time when Americans are worried about all kinds of fanatics, for good cause. And free speech and free press require us to tolerate our own fanatics. But we have the right to question them in a civil way, and if they can't give a civil answer, they reveal themselves incapable of the rational discourse on which democracy depends. □